

Hit, Run and Hit Again

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BEHIND THE BURMA ROAD: The Story of America's Most Successful Guerrilla Force. By William R. Peers and Dean Brelis. Illustrated. 246 pp. Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown. \$5.95.

By CHARLTON OGBURN Jr.

WHEN Gen. Frank Merrill's long-range penetration columns worked their way through northern Burma in 1944, they found that the area had already been penetrated by several groups of three or four Americans. Each of them, in informal attire, were leading Robin Hood existences in picturesque hide-outs safeguarded by troops of what looked like native Boy Scouts armed with fowling pieces and Tommy guns. These were field units of the famous 101 Detachment of Wild Bill Donovan's O.S.S., otherwise known as the Kachin Rangers. In a theater known for the heterogeneity of its soldiery, the fluidity of its operations, its way-out air, its eccentric individuals and its habit of massacre by ambush, 101 was as heterogeneous as any and second to none in fluidity, individualism and skill in way-laying the varriest patrols.

With, ultimately, nearly 700 American officers and men and a maximum strength of 10,000 locals, mostly recruited and trained deep in Japanese-held territory, 101 waged guerrilla warfare for three years in Burma north and east of Mandalay. They knocked out 15,000 Japanese, destroying thousands of tons of equipment, 277 military vehicles and 51 bridges and rescuing 574 men on our side, mostly downed fliers—and slapping down a Chinese war lord who was feeling his oats.

It is a record that does the American people (or the very small percentage who contributed to it) great credit, achieved as it was by individual ingenuity, adaptability and courage, by teamwork and by a cause that turned spectators into partisans ready to face death for it—not by overwhelming numbers and supplies. Its lessons for the present age—when the great powers are so thoroughly in one another's grip that all they can do, within the limits of discretion, is kick each other on the shins

Mr. Ogburn wrote "The Marauders," an account of the ill-fated Burma campaign of 1944.

under the table—do not need laboring.

This history of the 101 Detachment, as it would have been called in the days when titles were meant to inform rather than sound ruffles and flourishes, is written with legitimate pride by its commanding officer assisted by Dean Brelis. The latter has been over the ground twice before, at least partially: once as a lieutenant in the actual operations, again as the author of the novel "Mission." It cannot have been an easy history to tell.

The operations of 101 were scattered and usually small-scale, tied together to begin with by some home-made radio sets and a 1926 Gypsy Moth. Even later, when the outfit had busy radio nets, could call on Allied air forces for support gratefully rendered and had an important place in theater strategy, its activities comprised mostly hit-and-run attacks and information gathering by lonely isolated bands. Before the end, it also fought pitched battles in battalion strength.

THE authors fit the pieces together coherently, and the picture that emerges is such as to make the reader wonder why anyone to begin with thought the scheme would work and marvel at the end that it did so, brilliantly, with such comparatively light casualties to those who carried it out.

In the matter of the great theater schism, Colonel Peers is stanchly partial to Lieut. Gen. "Uncle" or "Vinegar" Joe Stilwell, which makes his book very different from that just written by Col. Charles N. Hunter, who commanded Merrill's Marauders during most of the campaign for Myitkyina and in "Galahad" has written a stinging critique of the theater command. The style is somewhat ponderous and military. The volume is likely to appeal less to general readers than to professionals and historians and to veterans of the Burma campaign whose capacity for war, if they are like this reviewer, increases in direct proportion to their distance from it. Colonel Peers and his collaborator have, however, made a permanent contribution to the literature of irregular warfare, a field of growing importance.

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Close to battle lines in North Burma, Gen. Joseph Stilwell (left) and Col. William R. Peers plan operations for the 101st Detachment, 1944.